

# RIVERS

*It is also ordered by the Court that the Cut at Green Harbor  
for a boat passage shall be made eighteen fete wide and six fete  
deepe. And for the manner how the same shall be done for the better  
ordering thereof it is referred to the Governour and Assistants with the  
help of John Winslowe, Jonathan Brewster, John Barnes & Christopher  
Waddesworth aswell to portion every man equally to the charge thereof  
as also to order men that shall worke thereat, that ten men may  
worke together at once, and that the Governour or whome he shall appoynt  
shall oversee the same that it may be well formed.*

Actual original record taken from volume eleven of the Plymouth Colony Laws of 1623-1682, page 25. It reads, "It is also ordered by the Court that the Cut at Green Harbor for a boat passage shall be made eighteen foote wide and six foote deepe. And for the manner how the same shall be done for the better ordering thereof it is referred to the Governur and Assistants with the help of John Winslowe Jonathon Brewster John Barnes Christopher Waddesworth aswell to portion every man equally to the charge thereof as also to order men that shall worke thereat, than ten men may worke together there at once, and the Gounor or whom he shall appoynt shall oversee the same that it may be well formed."

## America's FIRST Canal

by EDWARD ROWE SNOW

ONE OF THE MOST UNUSUAL SITUATIONS in all New England coastline history concerns part of the shoreline of Plymouth County in Massachusetts. More than three centuries ago, the people of Plymouth, Duxbury, Kingston, and Marshfield banded together to reduce the dangers of marine communication in the area by digging America's first canal from Plymouth Bay to Green Harbor, Marshfield. In addition to this human activity, natural changes had been taking place in the region long before the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, in fact even before Columbus made his trip across the Atlantic.

The North River, the South River, and the Cut River all figure in both the natural and the artificial changes along the Plymouth County coastline.

The North River, before the year 1600, had its mouth or opening into

the sea where it is at the present time. Nevertheless the mouth of the North River has changed within the memory of man at least four times. Even before the Pilgrims reached the New World there had been an area designated as Old Harbor located between what is now known as the Third Cliff and the Fourth Cliff in Scituate.

During the great gale of 1635, which according to historians brought a tide 20 feet high, the river sealed up between the Third and Fourth Cliffs and forced its way miles to the south into the sea.

This new mouth of the river lasted until 1723. Then, during the terrible November gale of that year, the ocean again broke through and for a time the North River had two different mouths several miles apart. Gradually, however, the southern mouth (Text continued on page 81)

## America's FIRST Canal

*continued*

became deeper and the Third Cliff-Fourth Cliff area dried out. For more than a century and a half, or during the major period of North River launchings, the North River mouth retained its southern opening.

Although the beach between Third and Fourth Cliffs effectively kept back the ocean, it was by only the thinnest of margins. Then, during the 1898 Portland Gale, with its several hours of demoniacal fury, the new mouth was formed between the Third and Fourth Cliffs and the old mouth at the Marshfield boundary line gradually silted in with sand.

It is true that in 1851 and again in 1888 the mouth of the river moved a few hundred yards both north and south to create a delta-like formation, but it was not until 1898 that the river mouth moved bodily several miles to the north to reoccupy the area it had occupied in the 17th Century.

On the other hand, the Cut River activity which began in Pilgrim days, although changed from time to time in its relation to the sea, is almost entirely an inland project.

Late in April of 1965 I revisited this little-known waterway variously called Cut River, the Breakthrough, and the Canal. At one time it was used almost daily by the Pilgrims of Plymouth. (The portion of the Cut River from Green Harbor north seems to be now known as the Green Harbor River—Ed.)

New England mariners from almost the beginning of Pilgrim history have dreaded rounding the Gurnet Peninsula in bad weather, as they entered or sailed from Plymouth Harbor. After losing several vessels of their colony, the early Pilgrims decided to attempt digging a canal from the north part of Duxbury into southern Marshfield.

After laborious efforts, the Break Through, or Cut River, as it has been called since, was completed. Probably it saved the lives of scores by offering a quiet inland waterway between Plymouth, Kingston, Duxbury, and Marshfield, and avoiding the dangers of the North Atlantic.

I believe I have the honor of making the last complete trip by anything resembling sailing craft all the distance through the Cut River region. That was in the year 1956. In my sailing canoe, with my wife Anna-Myrle and our daughter Dorothy, we left from Scituate, Massachusetts, in the region of the Old Oaken Bucket well, alongside Route 3A, and started out into the North River.

We paddled just off Trouant's Island, which is opposite the new mouth of the North River, and went into the old North River opening, the area which is now known as the South River. We were wise enough to choose the highest tide of the month and soon were paddling into the Green Harbor River and on down to the Brant Rock region. We reached the Cut River and started toward the Duxbury border.

All this time we were meeting people whose summer residences bordered the Cut River—but of the Cut River they knew nothing! It was quite an experience explaining to the people whose back yards we and the high tide had invaded that this was actually the earliest waterway in New England history. Again and again people would come running down to us as our sailing canoe passed by their homes. I should have printed a circular so I could give it out, because I repeated my story so often that both Mrs. Snow and Dorothy were tired of hearing my raucous voice explaining what we were doing.

Finally, (*continued on next page*)



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we arrived at the little creek in back of Duxbury Park, which in turn widens as it flows under the Prison Point Bridge. We had to take the mast down to get under the bridge, and the various fishermen who were catching flounders, sculpins, and codfish shouted gleefully as we passed under the bridge. Reaching an area abeam of Clark's Island, we soon passed the Duxbury Pier Light. The tide by this time had definitely started to go out, and so we went ashore briefly to view the bones of the *General Arnold* on the flats. Her wreck cost the lives of more than 100 American soldiers and sailors in the year 1778.

Far in the distance we could see the columns which surround Plymouth Rock: two hours later our sailing canoe grounded on the shale just below the Rock itself. Beside the Rock we made a final picture of our trip, and then went up to eat a hearty meal at a nearby restaurant.

From an historical point of view, the records indicate that the Pilgrims thought long and carefully about digging this first American canal.

Quoting from the *American Magazine* for the year 1837:

"The Cut river, so called, is in the town of Marshfield, county of Plymouth. It is not a large river; generally from three to five rods in width; and it extends, (in a very circuitous course like most other rivers and creeks) upwards of three miles. Its general course is from west and northwest, to the east and southeast. Within fifty years, the bed of the river near the sea, and the outlet, (which is into the ocean about half way from the Gurnet, at the entrance of Plymouth harbor, and Scituate) has become changed and entirely filled up at the distance of eighty or one hundred rods.

"It is believed few such changes have been known in this country. There has been, indeed, a change of the beach and harbor of Chatham, on the back side of Cape Cod; but to what extent we have not been informed. The alteration both of the river and beach near the outlet, may be stated with a good

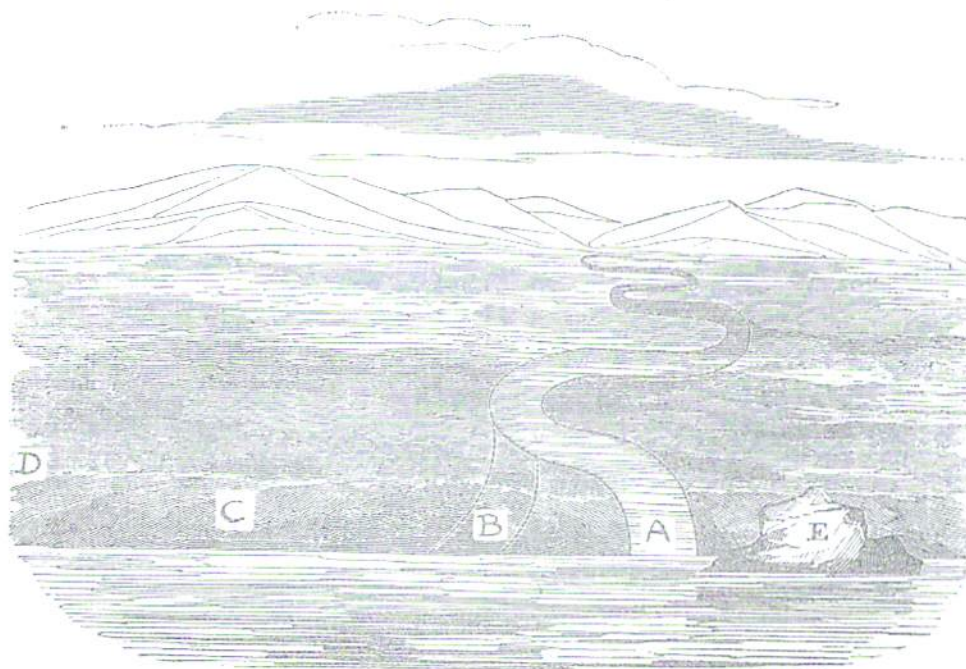


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*This old drawing from the American Magazine of 1837, shows the mouth (A) of the Cut River as it meets the ocean at the location of the large rock (E) designated also on the map on page 73. The designations B and C are used to show the changes in the river's mouth from about 1800 to 1837. D designates the highlands which prevented the sea from further changing the river mouth. The portion of the river now sometimes referred to as the Green Harbor River—which goes through Marshfield toward the South River (see map page 73)—was part of the Cut River and it is this part which is shown above. The actual "cut" portion would, we assume, branch off to the left in this drawing and head towards Duxbury.*

measure of accuracy, as follows—for the distance of about five rods next to the mouth of the river, or its junction with the ocean, the river was made to take a more southerly direction, and the channel or deepest part, was removed farther west than it had before been. The cause of this change is found in the sand of the beach, on the east and northeast of the river but adjoining it, being forced inwardly into the side of the river next to it, by the waves of the ocean, in times of high winds and storms.

"The beach itself thus became gradually

changed, being, in the course of several years, some rods more westerly than it had been. The bed or channel of the river (we speak of the lower part near the ocean) was therefore constantly changing, and being in or over a spot farther west than formerly.

"By this process, in about thirty years, the spot or meadow over which the river ran was quite different from its former course; and the sand of the beach occupied the old bed of the river. The moving of the sand of the beach also gradually filled up the old outlet to the ocean; and forced the river so



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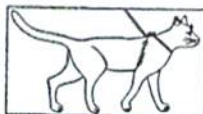
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to run as to find an outlet about seventy rods south of the ancient mouth. But after several years, the second mouth or outlet was also choked up; and the waters of the river overflowed some new lands and became stagnant."

Actually, the Pilgrims were able from the very beginning, during periods of new moon and full moon, to navigate (at high tide) shallow-draft craft from Plymouth to Green Harbor, Marshfield. Even before 1630 they were anxious, nevertheless, to cut through with enough depth in the canal to make America's first artificial waterway practical during all times except extreme low water.

I have spent hour upon hour delving into the records of the early Pilgrims and believe that I have uncovered most of the material which explains how the men of the 17th Century dug the canal so that it could be used 20 hours out of the 24.

The most important period of canal construction was in the Winter of 1636. At the General Court held at New Plymouth in that year it was ordered by the court—the actual hand-written record of which is reproduced on page 72.

Year after year, especially after great storms swept the coast, the Cut River had to be "cleaned out" and, by the time of the article already quoted from the *American Magazine* of 1837, the later-day Pilgrims were having their troubles keeping the waterway navigable.

By 1850 most craft were large and substantially built, enabling them to go around Gurnet Light and thus avoid the Cut River altogether. Nevertheless, the first American canal in history is a pleasant reminder today of early Pilgrim industry. ♦♦

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